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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000027

SIPDIS

FOR NEA/FO, NEA/IPA AND NEA/MAG

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/14/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: TUNISIA WILL NOT ATTEND DOHA SUMMIT

REF: TUNIS 14

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Tunisia will not attend the January 16 extraordinary Arab League Summit in Doha. The Foreign Ministry released a statement to this effect on January 13 and Foreign Minister Abdallah confirmed it to the Ambassador. According to Abdallah's calculations, the pro-summit faction within the Arab League was one country short of a quorum, but he noted Iraq was under heavy pressure to go. Abdallah expressed anger over Qatar's support for Hamas. While conceding that Israel has a right to defend itself against Hamas rockets, he took issue with what he described as Israel's disproportionate response. He said the situation in Gaza had provoked intense anger on the part of Arab youth, making life difficult for all moderate Arab governments. End Summary.

GOT Releases Public Statement

¶2. (C) The Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on January 13 issued a statement via the Tunis-Afrique Press Agency indicating that Tunisia did not intend to participate in the extraordinary Arab League Summit in Doha. The statement (which has been emailed to NEA/MAG) went on to say that the GOT would attend the Arab League Ministerial in Kuwait on January 19-20. It concluded that the Kuwait ministerial "represents an ideal framework for assessing the situation and formulating recommendations to be submitted to the Arab leaders to be implemented to stop the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip..."

¶3. (C) In a January 14 meeting, Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah echoed the points made in the statement, noting that the ministerial in Kuwait, at which he would represent Tunisia, would provide ample opportunity to discuss the situation in Gaza. The Ambassador expressed appreciation for this constructive Tunisian position. Abdallah told the Ambassador that he and President Ben Ali have been seized with the question of the January 16 Extraordinary Arab League Summit. Arab leaders have been furiously working the phones, he explained, as the pro-Summit faction seeks a quorum. Abdallah indicated that, according to the GOT's calculations, those in favor of the summit are one country shy of the 15 participants they need. He continued that al-Jazeera's reporting that Morocco is in favor is incorrect; he had been on the phone with his Moroccan counterpart and confirmed that Morocco was not going. Abdallah said that left summit proponents with Iraq, which is now under extreme pressure to go.

¶4. (C) Abdallah expressed anger that Qatar is showing

increasingly open support for Hamas. He said he could not understand the "game" that Qatar is playing. "What are they thinking," he asked rhetorically, "by proposing that Hamas be invited into the heart of the Arab League? That there are two Palestines?" He said his Qatari counterpart had called him three times in the last two days but that the Tunisian position had remained firm. Abdallah also complained about that the UAE Foreign Minister had told him on January 13 that the Emirates were opposed to the summit, only to reverse himself today. Libyan Leader al-Qaddhafi had also flip-flopped, according to Abdallah.

Situation in Gaza a Catastrophe

¶5. (C) Abdallah opened his meeting with the Ambassador by referring to the situation in Gaza as a "catastrophe." Ambassador stressed that Israel had a right to self defense and that Hamas was an organization of extremists. He added, however, that the United States was concerned by the humanitarian situation of the Palestinians in Gaza. Abdallah readily acknowledged Israel's right to defend itself, and he conceded that Hamas' indiscriminate firing of rockets did constitute aggression. Nonetheless, he said, Israel's response has been disproportionate in terms of the number of dead and wounded, and the preponderance of civilian casualties.

¶6. (C) Abdallah said that the situation in Gaza had made it very difficult for moderate Arab governments to keep the peace on their streets. The youth are angry, he said, and

TUNIS 00000027 002 OF 002

they want to take to the streets. They see us as being "soft," he complained. As part of its continuing campaign to show solidarity with the people of Gaza, the GOT announced on January 14 that it would be sending a second plane-load of humanitarian goods, mostly medicine and medical equipment.

¶7. (C) With respect to the anger on the Tunisian "street," Abdallah said that Interior Minister Rafik Belhaj Kacem is completely occupied with keeping a handle on the situation in Tunisia. This now entails keeping an eye on every high school, he explained. Abdallah noted that he and Belhaj Kacem, whom he considers a friend, usually speak with one another up to five times per day. Lately, he said, the Interior Minister has not had time for any contact.

Comment

¶8. (C) Tunisia is not always forthcoming on other issues on our bilateral agenda, but it deserves credit for its continuing moderation vis-a-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. End Comment.

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